

Beyond Hermeneutics: Peirce's Semiology as a Trinitarian Metaphysics of Communication

James Bradley

Preview

Bradley contends that the semiology of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), the founder of pragmatism, is a standing challenge as much to Gadamerian hermeneutics as to Saussure's structuralism and its deconstructionist progeny. For Peirce physical matter itself is one specific mode of the activity of semiosis or sign interpretation. The paper outlines the central point and purpose of Peirce's general metaphysics and describe the basic features of his theory of signs.

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Communication**

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The semiology of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), the founder of pragmatism, is a standing challenge as much to Gadamerian hermeneutics as to Saussure's structuralism and its deconstructionist progeny. Peirce's semiology constitutes a rejection of Saussure: because Saussure's structuralism operates only in terms of a binary or dyadic relation of signifier (words) and signified (concepts), his account of communication is nominalist (concepts say nothing about the world) and subjective-idealist (communication is a matter of linguistic structures alone). Deconstruction takes this subjective idealism to its extreme limit by treating communication as nothing more than the differential plurality of signifiers—a paradoxical form of monism. Peirce's semiology equally rejects the hermeneutical restriction of communication to human interaction with the world; even if Gadamer occasionally hints at a larger metaphysics,¹ he is unable to realize it on account of his subjective-idealist entanglements. Now Peirce is indeed an idealist, but his is an ontological or objective idealism in the sense that he sees the cosmos as an information exchange system, a communication system that is constituted by the interpretation of signs.² For Peirce, physical matter itself

¹ See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. J. Weinsheimer and D. G. Marshall (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1994), 105, 108, 475.

² Apart from unpublished manuscripts (in the Harvard Library, referred to as *MS*), references to Peirce's published works in what follows are mainly to his *Collected Papers* (abbreviated as *CP*), vols. 1–6, eds. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss; vols. 7–8, ed. Arthur E. Burks (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931–35); *The New Elements of Mathematics by Charles Sanders Peirce*

is one specific mode of the activity of semiosis or sign interpretation.³ Briefly to indicate something of the power, originality and historical depth of this extraordinary position, I will first of all outline what I take to be the central point and purpose of Peirce's general metaphysics, for that is in my view the context in which his semiology, or any other aspect of his thinking, is always to be understood. I will then go on to describe the basic features of his theory of signs.

Peirce's Metaphysical Method

Peirce's metaphysics is quite distinct from that of his continental counterparts in that it is elaborated in close relation to modern developments in mathematics and the logic of relations (to both of which he made signal contributions), and it is marked by an insistence on the intelligibility of things. He sees himself as the inheritor of the metaphysical tradition (he was an expert in medieval philosophy) and as bringing about a renaissance of metaphysics: his work has the empiricist intent of rescuing rationality from the absolute necessities of Mind or pure Reason, characteristic of the European rationalism and idealism, and the rationalist intent of restoring intelligible order to those structures of experience which both rationalists and empiricists alike have often consigned to the realm of the non-rational, typically under the rubrics of "ineffability," "feeling," or "action."

Peirce's metaphysical method is oriented, not to the traditional understanding of mathematics as based on self-evidently true axioms, but to the postulatory procedures of modern mathematics and the experimentalism of natural science. In this context, his metaphysics is based, like any inquiry, on faith (Latin, *fides*: trust) in the hypothesis of reason. This hypothesis is for Peirce

(abbreviated as *NEM*), 4 vols., ed. Carolyn Eisele (The Hague: Mouton, 1976); and *Reason and the Logic of Things* (abbreviated as *RLT*), ed. Kenneth Lane Ketner (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992). Where required, reference will also be made to the *Writings of C. S. Peirce: A Chronological Edition* (abbreviated as *CE*), vols. 1–6, Peirce Edition Project (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982). There are no references in the present article to *Semiotic and Signifacs: The Correspondence Between Charles S. Peirce and Victoria Lady Welby*, eds. C. Hardwick and J. Cook (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), but it should be consulted by any student of Peirce's semiology.

³ Unlike Berkeley, as will become evident, Peirce does not reduce material entities to signs. For Peirce's view of Berkeley, see *CP* 8. 7–38, or *CE* 2, 462–87.

articulated by the principle of reason, the principle that “Nothing is without a reason,” or “Everything that is the case must have a reason why it is the case.”⁴ Negatively, the principle of reason requires the rejection of the no-hypothesis hypothesis: “the hypothesis that no hypothesis is possible,” as Peirce puts it.⁵ For the principle of reason rejects the essentially sceptical theory or hypothesis that there are things which no theory or hypothesis can explain. It rejects the hypothesis that there is anything that is ultimately inexplicable in the sense that there is anything about which no explanatory theory can be sought and entertained.

Positively, the principle of reason requires unrestricted commitment to the search for explanation. No appeal is made here to an *a priori* rule. We have only the experimental or hypothetical application of the principle of reason to the fact that we live in a puzzling world. Further, the principle of reason requires that we go beyond even the most basic laws and operations of logic, mathematics and physics, for these do not account, nor do they attempt to account, for why there are laws or operations at all. Unrestrictedly applied, the principle of reason requires that we look for an ultimate that is self-justifying or self-explanatory.

Peirce’s metaphysics is thus a “speculative” metaphysics in the sense that it is a theory of the actualization of the empirical world, a theory of the *activity* of actualization. Moreover, such a metaphysics would have to meet the stringent requirement that whatever is held to be the ultimate or self-explanatory principle of actualization must possess in its own nature, or provide out of its own nature, all the reasons needed to explain its existence or activity.

Self-explanatoriness is not of course the same as proof. Indeed, the question as to what constitutes an adequate self-explanatory theory of the activity of actualization is hotly debated between the different speculative schools that seek the self-explanatory. For brevity, I shall call them speculative ‘explanatorists,’ in contrast to speculative ‘descriptivists’ like, say, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Bergson or Deleuze, who take the principle of reason far enough to offer anti-empiricist theories of the activity of actualization, but refuse to press it any further and so abandon the concern with the self-explanatory. In the

⁴ For this latter formulation, see Alexander R. Pruss, *The Principle of Sufficient Reason: A Reassessment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 3. I use the term “principle of reason,” and not “sufficient reason,” in order to disassociate the principle from the usual necessitarian interpretations, both of it and of Leibniz. For Peirce on the principle of reason or “first law of inquiry,” see his *CP* 1, 135; 1, 139; 1, 150; 1, 405; 1, 170; 6, 171; 7, 480; 8, 168; and *RLT* 180.

⁵ Peirce, *MS* 956, c. 1890.

‘explanatorist’ tradition from Plato on, the principle of reason generally operates in the way that Peirce is the first to define as ‘abduction.’ In his words: “The surprising fact *C* is observed/But if *A* were true, *C* would be a matter of course/Hence, there is reason to suppose that *A* is true.”⁶ The argument is not a deduction, since it does not claim that its conclusion must be true if its premises are true. It is not inductive, since the statement referred to in the conclusion is not tested by sampling. Whereas induction tells us that a statement, true in some cases, is likely to be true in unobserved cases, abduction allows us to conclude to the likelihood of something unlike anything that is observed. It is inference to the best possible explanation. The procedure is fallibilist: repeated application of abductive inference may lead to continued revision of our hypothesis in the light of new observations, as has always been the case with explanatorist theories of actualization. And the hypothesis is not just tested against experience. Experience is tested against the hypothesis, which has the status of a critical principle: do the putative observations, or our descriptions of the observed, display the characters posited by the hypothesis? Ostensive demonstration cuts both ways. Or, more precisely, it moves in a virtuous circle.

There are two further hypotheses that are basic to Peirce’s metaphysics. There is the hypothesis of reality: namely, that reality is that which has a nature of its own, in the sense that it is so independently of our minds or independently of whether or not we think it to be so. There is also the hypothesis of universalism, or the reality of universals. The hypotheses of reason, reality and universalism are taken up, elaborated and defended by Peirce by way of his speculative metaphysics of actualization.

The Metaphysics of Triunity

Speculative theories of the principle of actualization, whether explanatorist or descriptivist, come in five different forms. A principle of actualization could be monadic, as is Nietzsche’s theory of the Will to Power, or, most obviously, the Judaic and Islamic account of the creator God as an absolutely unique, singular being whose nature is defined as completely transcending human powers of reason.

A principle of actualization could be binary or dyadic, as when the foundations of the cosmos are held by Empedocles to be the twin principles of love and strife, by Democritus to be atoms and the void, by Schopenhauer to be

⁶ Peirce, *CP* 6, 528.

will and idea, by Samuel Alexander to be space and time, or by Alain Badiou to be being and event. A principle of actualization could be triadic, as is Plotinus's hierarchy of the One, Mind, and Soul, Spinoza's hierarchy of Substance, Attributes, and Modes, and Deleuze's non-hierarchical threefold of Difference (or Event, or Being⁷), virtualities, and specific differences or events. A principle of actualization could be tetradic, as in Plato's *Timaeus* with its fourfold of the Good, the God, Form, and Matter, or in Whitehead's "categorical scheme" of creativity, God, eternal objects and actual occasions.

There can be no question, however, that the tradition which dominates the history of Western speculative thought is that which holds the principle of actualization to be a triunity of three distinct, irreducible, but inseparable and coequal elements. Most would acknowledge that this tradition stretches from Plato's *syntrisi* or three-in-one,⁸ through the medieval period, to the idealism of Hegel and Schelling. It is not so often noticed, however, that it has been a significant feature of modern philosophy over the last one hundred and fifty years. I refer primarily to Peirce's ontology of "firstness," "secondness" and "thirdness," but there is also the later Heidegger's *das Ereignis* ("the Event"), with its triunity of *Es gibt* ("It gives"), *die Sendung* ("the sending"), and *die Gabe* ("the gift"), as well as Collingwood's treatment of the Trinity as the fundamental "absolute presupposition" of natural science.⁹

Two comments may help to dispel any puzzlement there may be at the persistence of the notion of triunity as a theory of the activity of actualization. First, because the triune theories mentioned are explanatorist, they are elaborated

⁷ See Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale, ed. Constantin V. Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 179–180; see also Robert Piercey's excellent essay, "The Spinoza-intoxicated man: Deleuze on expression," *Man and World* 29 (1996): 269–281.

⁸ Plato, *Philebus*, 64–65; see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Idea of the Good in the Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*, trans. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1986), 115–116.

⁹ See R. G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Metaphysics* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1940), chapter 21; Martin Heidegger, *On Time and Being*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper Books, 1972); see also James Bradley, "Transformations in Speculative Philosophy," *The Cambridge History of Modern Philosophy 1870–1945*, ed. Tom Baldwin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 438–448. Josiah Royce's theory of the triune structure of interpretation could be added to the names I have given in the text; see his *The Problem of Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1913), especially volume 2. This is a book written under the acknowledged influence of Peirce. The triunity of existence, relation, and meaning expounded in John Dewey's *Experience and Nature* (1929 [New York: Dover Books, 1958]), is a naturalization of Peirce's threefold.

so as to address three basic questions. These are the questions of the nature of origin, difference and order. For in the first place an explanatorist theory of the activity of actualization requires a theory of the origin of difference and order. That is, it requires an account of that activity which is in some sense prior to difference and order because it is the condition of difference and order. In the second place, an explanatorist theory requires an account of the actualization of difference or individuality, of the nature of differentiation. And in the third place, such a theory requires an account of the actualization of order. The primacy attached to these issues is of course characteristic of the triune tradition itself. But they have a certain obviousness about them that helps to indicate the rationale of the general position.

Secondly, there is a set of considerations connected with the development of mathematics and the rise of natural science. In the medieval period, the doctrine of the triune God, with its theory of the “persons” of Father, Son, and Spirit, is expounded as a supernatural or revealed mystery of faith. This is not to deny that the triune God is employed to provide a self-explanatory account of the activity of actualization. In Aquinas, for example, all things have their *esse*, or act of being, which is given by the Father; their individual nature (species), which is given by the Son or Logos; and their relation to other things which is given by the Spirit, the principle or gift of love or community.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the concept of an essentially relational being cuts across the Aristotelian view that finite substances exist independently and that relations are accidents. Hence it is difficult in the context of Aristotelian metaphysics to develop a trinitarian account of all the features of the created world. By contrast, once mathematics and natural science had established the intrinsic relationality of the natural world,¹¹ the relational model could unproblematically be transposed, under the rubric of triunity, not only to the analysis of the constitution of the finite subject (as with Kant’s plethora of triunities¹²), but also to the whole of reality, defined as an absolute subject with three essential modes or functional operations (Hegel and

¹⁰ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a, q. 45, a. 7.

¹¹ See Ernst Cassirer, *Substance and Function* (1910), trans. W. C. and M. C. Swabey (New York: Open Court, 1923). See also Gerd Buchdahl, *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Science* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969), chapter 1.

¹² Hegel says of Kant: “The conception of the Trinity has, through the influence of the Kantian philosophy, been brought into notice again in an outward [read: purely formal] way as a type, and, as it were, a ground plan of thought, and this in very definite forms of thought.” G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, trans. E. B. Speirs and J. B. Sanderson (New York: Humanities Press, 1974), vol. 3, 32-33.

Schelling¹³). As Collingwood puts it: “The doctrine of the Trinity, taught as a revelation by early Christianity ... becomes in Kant and his successors a demonstrable and almost alarmingly fertile logical principle.”¹⁴ In a relational world, there is no longer anything unintelligible about the triune principle, which thus becomes an immanent ground of actualization, even though it is still apprehended as complete and all-containing (Hegel) or as resolving its own nature independently of its creation (Schelling). I now turn to the sea-change that Peirce brings about in the theory of triunity, transforming the medieval theory of persons and the German Idealist theory of the absolute subject into a radically immanent logic of events.¹⁵

Peirce’s Metaphysics of Triunity

Peirce’s Trinitarianism is a natural theology, or, more precisely, an empiricist-oriented metaphysics, of the Trinity: it attempts to make manifest the necessarily creative and radically immanent triune principle of actualization across the fields of logic, mathematics, phenomenology, semiotics and speculative cosmology. Although there is no space to elaborate this large claim here, I will

¹³ That this position is not to be confused with Sabellianism is indicated by the fact that theologians as different as Karl Barth and Karl Rahner work within its purview. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. T. Thomson (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1936), vol. 1, pt. 1, chapter 3; and Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: The Crossroad Herder Publishing Company, 1970).

¹⁴ R. G. Collingwood, “Reason Is Faith Cultivating Itself” (1927), in *Faith and Reason*, ed. Lionel Rubinoff (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1968), 119–20.

¹⁵ It will I hope become evident that it is regrettable that Peirce scholars, Peircean philosophers of religion and theologians generally ignore Peirce’s Trinitarianism, no doubt influenced by the predominant naturalism and conceptual-historical amnesia of Anglo-American culture. For the only exceptions to this rule that I know, see Hermann Deuser, *Gott: Geist und Nature. Theologische Konsequenzen aus Charles S. Peirce’s Religionsphilosophie*, Berlin: Konigshausen & Neumann, 1993, pp. 157, 166, 173, where, albeit briefly and cautiously, he points out the correlation of Peirce’s categories to the Trinity; and *Charles Sanders Peirce: Religionsphilosophische Schriften*, eds. Hermann Deuser & Helmut Maassen, Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1995, pp. xli–xlii. For strictly biographical treatments of the topic, see Joseph Brent, *Charles Sanders Peirce: A Life* (1993), Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2nd. rev. ed., 1998, especially pp. 54, 62–65, 71, 333; and Max Fisch, “Introduction,” *CE* 1, pp. xxx–xxxii. Gerard Deledalle, *Charles S. Peirce’s Philosophy of Signs: Essays in Comparative Semiotics*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001, Chapters 16 and 17, is exceptional in taking Peirce’s Trinitarianism seriously. Very oddly, however, he interprets Peirce’s triunities hierarchically, not coequally, and conflates this interpretation with the Trinitarianism of the Eastern Church.

say something about how I interpret each principle of his triunity, drawing specifically on his cosmology, and I will try to indicate as I proceed something of its significance as an event ontology. Throughout, it is important to keep in mind that for Peirce any identifiable entity whatsoever is to be analyzed in terms of his triune principle of actualization, which is distinct but inseparable from that which it actualizes or creates. This means, as will become evident, that any identifiable entity has the nature of a triune event in the infinitely or inexhaustibly proceeding movement of actualization.

In the first place, the self-explanatory first principle of actualization, which Peirce calls “firstness,” is pure ecstatic or ablative activity, abductive “movement from ...” Because it is origin, it is unconditioned. So it is free or spontaneous in the sense that it acts wholly out of its own nature. Because it is unconditioned or free activity, it is limitless in the sense that it is absolutely indeterminate in its own nature. It is a free *ekstasis* which, as such, possesses no ‘real’ or determining properties or predicates. Its character as free ecstatic activity means that in the nature of the case it is a non-determining power.

This concept of origin follows both Marius Victorinus and the Franciscan voluntarists in making being or activity (*esse, actus essendi*) prior to mind, and it owes a great deal to Schelling’s theory of *Abgrund*. However, Peirce abandons the psychological notion of will, characteristic of voluntarism, as well as the Gnostic and mystical elements in Schelling. Instead, he elaborates the concept of origin in terms of a particular kind of mathematical infinite. His is not the potential infinite of Aristotle and the intuitionists, where however many parts it is divided into, it is possible for there to be more. Nor is it the real categorematic infinite of set theory, involving an infinite multiplicity of sets in which the parts or components are really there and their number is greater than any given. Rather, Peirce’s firstness is a particular kind of syncategorematic infinite. That is, his primordial infinite is real in that it is inexhaustible activity, and it is potential in that its absolute indeterminacy means “it contains no definite parts;”¹⁶ it is a continuum of potential parts only.¹⁷ Peirce’s infinite is a syncategorematic infinite of real or dynamical potentiality.

One main feature of this theory of infinity is that here we have a concept of origin which in the nature of the case is not a One, not an All, not a Totality, not

¹⁶ Peirce, *CP* 6, 168.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 185; Peirce, *NEM* 4, 343.

even a multiplicity of any kind. As Peirce stresses, this is a mathematical concept of pure chance.¹⁸

Peirce describes free or indeterminate firstness as a no-thing or void.¹⁹ That is, firstness is nothing, not as all-containing plenitude (*per excellentiam nihil*), nor as vacuity (*omnino nihil*), nor as negation (*nihil privativum*), but only as infinite free indeterminacy (*nihil per infinitatem*).²⁰ It may be objected that this infinite origin is a ‘unity’ of free indeterminacy. However, as will be more fully explained in a moment, unity is in Peirce an effect, not a property of the origin; in Peirce, unity emerges out of the triune relation as its realization. The sole kind of unity that the first considered in its own nature possesses is the unity of irreducibility (*unum*), for the first is the *principium non de principio* and as such is unconditioned freedom. Peirce’s firstness is not a unicity in any other sense; rather, it is the univocal concept of a dynamical free indeterminacy that as such has no nature of its own, and, in communicating itself to all things, is necessarily never the same.

This brings us to Peirce’s principle of “secondness.” Because the first principle is ecstatic, self-realizing movement, it gives rise out of itself to a second activity or principle of actualization: the principle of essentially and spontaneously self-differentiating activity, of dative “movement to ...” The distinctness and irreducibility of this second principle resides in the fact that it is not in its own nature indeterminate activity but is the activity of determination: it constitutes differences or individuals, *haecceities*, and it does so by communicating to them the irreducible spontaneity that is the positive basis of all determinacy or actuality. Such differentiating activity is also the positive basis of the logical laws of non-contradiction, negation and the excluded middle. Because everything is itself and not another thing, a key phenomenological character of individuals for Peirce is reaction or resistance to that which is different.

There cannot, however, be any such thing as pure differences, for all difference (*aliquid*) involves not just irreducibility (*unum*) but difference of character or behaviour (*res*), however minimal. It follows that, for ecstatic activity to realize its differentiations as such—and so to realize itself in relation to its

¹⁸ Peirce, *CP* 6, 201.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 214ff.

²⁰ These various distinctions in the meaning of the term ‘nothing’ are made by John Scotus Eriugena; Peirce’s version of the *nihil per infinitatem* is not of course Eriugena’s, though his Trinitarianism has close relations to Eriugena’s. On Eriugena, see Werner Beierwaltes, “Negati Affirmatio,” *Dionysius* 1 (1977): 127–159, especially, 133–134.

differentiations—it articulates its communicative nature as a law or rule of relation for itself and for its differentiations. That is, because *ekstasis* is essentially communicative and self-realizing, it determines itself as a law or rule and communicates that power to its differentiations as their medium. Such power is the potentiality of order, and it is by way of the medium of order that differences are constituted. The distinctness and irreducibility of this third element resides in the fact that it is the activity of ordination, the actualizing principle of order or structure.

Peirce’s “thirdness” or power of mediation defines the implications of his theory of origin for specific laws or rules. Like differences, all structures are determinations of free indeterminacy, which is inexhaustible. In consequence, all structures carry free indeterminacy within their nature. So all structures possess an inexhaustible indeterminacy, which is always more than any of their individual instances. What this means is that all specific laws or rules are essentially and intrinsically vague: they are infinitely or inexhaustibly determinable determinations. Thus there are no really complete or completable wholes; as Peirce insists,²¹ for any given whole or continuity (e.g. “All men are mortal”), the universal quantifier is to be interpreted distributively (“For each ...”) not collectively (“For all ...”). Wholes are infinite in the distributive, not the collective, mode; and they are distributive wholes because they are intrinsically vague or infinitely indeterminate.

What we have in this *mathesis universalis* is one of the great revolutions in the theory of universals. Forms do not constitute an infinite multiplicity of fixed entities; rather, they are potentials that are subject to evolution, to development and decay. This is an explanatorist theory of the activity of actualization in which there is no complete, all-containing Totality or One. Unity—and with it the unity of truth—is an effect, not an origin. All achieved unities—including that of the triune principle of actualization itself—are dynamical events of spontaneity, difference, and order, which as such are essentially incomplete and open to further determination. For Peirce, there are no absolute individuals, for all entities are infinitely determinable determinations.

Peirce’s Semiology

It is evident that in Peirce being or activity is not primarily analyzed as substance or subjectivity but as communication, the self-communication of the triune

²¹ Peirce, *CP* 5, 532.

principle. Because what the triune principle communicates is itself, it communicates communicativity, and on a Peircean analysis communicativity is, in the nature of the case, triune in nature. We are here at the core of Peirce's semiology, the whole point and purpose of which is to make manifest the role of the Trinity in the actualization of the real.²² Indeed, it will become evident that his semiology is an evidential or phenomenological argument for the triune theory of evolutionary actualization. There is no appeal to 'hidden' causes here, only the task of ostensive demonstration, the task of bringing to light that which is most evident, most obvious and familiar, that which is so close to us we can miss it on account of its universal presence.

Within the fundamental speculative triunity of activity, difference and order, or firstness, secondness and thirdness, semiology is an analysis of order or thirdness. Before turning to this analysis, however, it is helpful to place it in a larger context by noting that, following Victorinus, Peirce views each of the members of his speculative threefold as themselves threefolds, on account of their intrinsically co-relational nature.²³ Thus Peirce has three types of firstness: firstness itself (which is pure spontaneity), the firstness of secondness (which is difference, individuality or existence, *ex-sistere*, to stand outside, a term coined by Victorinus to describe the members of the Trinity) and the firstness of thirdness (which is idea). Secondness is analyzed as existence, as cause, and as effect. Thirdness is analyzed as idea or sign, as the exchange of information between individual entities, and as interpretation; in other words, thirdness is itself a threefold of sign, object and interpretant. Here, sign occupies the position of firstness because it is the potentiality for interpretation; object occupies that of secondness because it is determinate; and the interpretant occupies that of thirdness because the interpretant has the sign-interpreting or sign-ordering role, and so has the status of a third.²⁴ Thus for Peirce semiology is the analysis of the triune relation of sign, object and interpretant. This will be further explained as we proceed. I will begin by giving an initial definition of the three semiological elements, presenting them in an order I find convenient.

²² For an early and explicit indication by Peirce of the Trinitarian orientation of his semiology, see his *CE* 1, 503.

²³ Peirce, *CP* 1, 530–38.

²⁴ Peirce, *CP* 2, 228, 274; See also Carl Hausman, *Charles S. Peirce's Evolutionary Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 70–71.

The Semiological Threefold

Peirce says: “A sign is a *representamen* with a mental interpretant.”²⁵ To use his example, the sunflower is a *representamen* or medium of the sun for its offspring. Its offspring is its interpretant. There is no mental representation here, but a serial information exchange or semiological event in which one entity (the sunflower) is a sign of an object (the sun) to another (the seed).

The sign stands in relation to an object. The object need not, however, be a cognized object: think of the sun as object in relation to the sunflower as sign. The object is the independent factor in semiological process, the factor that guides and constrains both sign and interpretant. Here, Peirce distinguishes between the “immediate” and the “dynamical” object. The immediate object is the individual object as it appears in a specific interpretive process. The dynamical object is the potentialities that an individual object has beyond any specific interpretive process.

Signs constrain and guide the interpretant. That is, they contain their own developmental conditions that contribute to semiological events consequent upon them. Signs are intrinsically vague and hence can evolve in the semiological process. What kind of process this is I will state in a moment.

Peirce uses the term “interpretant” rather than “interpretation” to get away from any cognitive connotations. Interpretants need not be existent minds, mental acts, cognitive entities, or even ‘experiencing’ entities of any kind.²⁶ It is not even necessary that an interpretant should actually exist: a being *in futuro* will suffice.²⁷ Whether an object has been interpreted is to be decided not by inspecting the contents of a mind or an experience but by seeing what behaviour follows from the contact in question.

The semiological threefold of sign, object, and interpretant constitutes an endless, infinitely proliferating, iterative semiotic series. The sign is what the object becomes for an interpretant, the interpretant is what the sign becomes, and in turn that interpretant becomes an object for a successor interpretant. Peirce’s semiology is thus a theory of active causation that rejects regularity and entailment theories: signs, objects and interpretants are each agent-causes that have their own spontaneity, and they are genuinely efficacious in that they are active in the production or determination of their effects. The semiological

²⁵ Peirce, *CP* 2, 274.

²⁶ Peirce, *CP* 1, 537.

²⁷ Peirce, *CP* 2, 92.

movement of actualization—the immanence of the threefold principle of actualization in all things—is through and through a theory of evolutionary process.

Relations and Applications of the Semiological Threefold

Peirce analyses the relations of the three semiological elements in terms of their inseparability and co-relationality. Given the general principle of Peirce's Trinitarian metaphysics that any identifiable entity is analysable as a threefold, it is no surprise that he defines the nature of signs accordingly. Here, I will simply state his basic, interdependent, trichotomous sign-schema and indicate the meaning of his technical terms:

Sign as object: qualisign (quality, intensity); sinsign (individual event/object, “replica” or token); legisign (general type). Note that no one element in this trichotomy can be what it is without the others.

Sign in relation to object: icon (similarity); index (causal relation); symbol (rule, natural or convention). Note that this second trichotomy has as its condition the first trichotomy.

Sign in relation to interpretant: rheme (predicate, possibility); dicisign (propositions, facts); argument (law for interpretant). This trichotomy is an analysis of the way icons, indices and symbols function for an interpretant.

A further feature of the intrinsic co-relationality characteristic of Peirce's sign analysis is that each member of his semiological threefold mediates the others. First, there is the mediatory role of the sign: the sign mediates object and interpretant. The object is the antecedent, the interpretant the consequence of the sign. For example: ‘President Lincoln’ as object; ‘liberator’ as sign; ‘President Lincoln as liberator’ is interpretant.²⁸ Secondly, there is the mediating role of the object, where the object mediates between sign and interpretant in that it constrains and guides both. Thirdly, the interpretant mediates sign and object. That is, it links them in the thought ‘President Lincoln as liberator.’ Note here, however, that in the infinite proliferation of the semiotic series the interpretant itself can become a sign mediating the object, President Lincoln, to a further interpretant, such as Lincoln's statue in Washington D. C. Again, what in our example was the object, President Lincoln, can become the sign which interprets an object, liberator. For Peirce, any referent of the semiological threefold can switch its roles, depending on its position in a specific semiological process

²⁸ On the President Lincoln example, see Carl Hausman, *Peirce's Evolutionary Philosophy*, 67ff.

Let me summarize this last point with some basic applications or examples, in order to bring out the extraordinary flexibility of Peirce's conception of the threefold semiological process. The relation of object and interpretant is the sign; e.g., the text of *King Lear* as object; audience as interpretant; performance as sign. The sign is what the object becomes in interpretation and each interpretation is an event of truth. The relation is serial: the sign itself becomes another object for a subsequent interpretant. Moreover, any referent, because of its intrinsically threefold nature, can be analyzed trivalently. For example, each element equally applies to the division of artist, artwork, and audience, for each of the latter can be treated as sign, object, or interpretant, depending on the context or perspective. Again, we can treat experience as object, artwork as sign, and artist or audience as interpretants. With respect to the artist or audience, it is noteworthy that the notion of the interpretant implies a semiological theory of the self as a continuous, unified series of self-interpreting events; something more than a Humean bundle and other than a fixed, enduringly identical substance.²⁹ Above all, no one element in the triunity of object, interpretant, sign can be prioritized over another. So there is space in this analysis for the critical freedom of the interpretant; the sign is defined neither as a differential engine, nor as a destined unfolding of Being, that operates over the heads of subjects. Thus Peirce can say: "The word or sign which man uses *is* the man himself ... Thus my language is the sum total of myself."³⁰ Or more graphically: "A *mind* may, with advantage, be roughly defined as a *sign-creator in connection with a reaction-machine*."³¹ Meaning is use, but it is the use of signs. This is a realist and social practice theory of meaning that never allows the ethical surrender of the individual interpretant.

Semiology and Teleology

To get a better grip on Peirce's theory of semiological process, we need to ask: what kind of active order is posited here?

The first thing to notice is that semiological order or a semiological event is intrinsically triune order. This means it cannot be defined as an order of two dyads: A : B and B : C. Smoke is a sign of fire, but not without an interpretant.

²⁹ For a superb analysis of Peirce's theory of the self, see Vincent M. Colapietro, *Peirce's Approach to the Self: A Semiotic Perspective on Human Subjectivity* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989).

³⁰ Peirce, *CP* 5, 314, emphasis mine.

³¹ Peirce, *MS* 318, p. 18.

There are only signs where there are objects *and* interpretants; that is, all semiological relations are relations that are *directed* to an interpretant. Hence all semiological relations are essentially teleological.

Teleology is activity, the goal or end of which is the realization or actualization of something. There are three types of teleology that Peirce distinguishes, and all are present to some degree in any semiological event.³² This analysis cannot, I believe, be ignored in any account of Peirce's semiology.

First, there is random teleology, where the interpretant spontaneously departs from the direction indicated by the sign or rule. Such departures are usually completely insignificant, though universal. They are purposeless, playful, and unconstrained either by external circumstance or by any internal logical consequences. The activity of actualization involved here is teleological in that it is self-realizing activity, free self-determination unconstrained by circumstance or rule. It is the teleology of play, purposiveness without (specific) purpose. So this is one type of purposeless teleology which arises from the presence in the realm of order of the ecstatic activity that is firstness or spontaneity.

Secondly, there is another type of purposeless teleology. This is mechanical teleology. Here the end is given and predetermined. External and logical conditions largely determine the outcome that is realized. The sunflower seed is a good example (always remembering that each sunflower seed is an individual or a centre of spontaneity, and so an active, if infinitesimal, departure from the general law). This type of purposeless teleology arises from the differential power of order in respect of individuals.

Thirdly, there is purposive teleology. Here the end is not predetermined and the outcome is not more or less exhaustively determined by external or logical conditions. There is no pre-given result: the sign or rule only vaguely determines or mediates the general character of the outcome. So within specific constraints the result is freely determined by the synthetic, organizing activity of the interpretant, which is always as inclusive or self-expansive as it can be. The semiological process here is purposive in that it is self-directed by the interpretant and is directed toward the interpretant. The interpretant, or the realization of the interpretant, is the object or end of its own activity. A good example might be the vagueness or indeterminate potentialities of a human personality.

On this account, given the universality of the semiological phenomenon, reality itself is essentially vague or incomplete. More precisely: the logical laws of non-contradiction and the excluded middle, as well as the semantic principle

³² Peirce, *CP* 6, 287–317.

of bivalence, are inapplicable or irrelevant to the domain of the first principle of the threefold but hold in that of the second principle, which is their actualizing condition. Such rules, that is, are not universal, as on the standard interpretation, but necessary features of individuality and its semantics. It follows that in respect of rules or generals, of which the third principle is the actualizing condition, the law of non-contradiction holds of them, but the law of excluded middle and the principle of bivalence do not.

For Peirce, therefore, vagueness is an ontological condition of all things, which means that in thinking we enjoy a relatively precise grasp of vague content. To put it another way: the incompleteness and indeterminacy of any identifiable entity, its infinite potentiality, entails the vagueness of all specific content.

Looked at in a historical perspective, Peirce is here appropriating Scotus's theory of the "imperfection" of metaphysical concepts and Kant's notion of the indeterminacy of regulative ideas. He transforms them into a realist theory of "vague" universals, or what he likes to call "generals." In this way he dissolves the Scotist opposition of logic and metaphysics. Further, he overcomes the Kantian tension between mechanism and teleology by holding them to be (as noted above) experienced and essentially interdependent modes of the realm of thirdness or ordination. Given Peirce's strong realism in respect of universals, it is no surprise he regards Kant as a nominalist in that (1) Kant treats rules, unlike particulars, as purely constructs of the mind and so gives primacy to particulars; and (2) Kant assumes that the law of excluded middle applies universally to the real, with the result that the indeterminate has a lesser status; hence (3) Kant problematically treats the noumenal realm of the *Ding an sich* as a realm of determinate individual entities that are nevertheless held to be unknowable. It is thus to be expected that subjective idealism holds no terrors for Peirce: "experience" is not a restrictive limit, but essentially and dynamically relational.

In this context, the crucial implication of Peirce's theories of infinity and vagueness should now be clear: there is no opposition between realism and constructivism, for the real is itself a movement of constructive activity. This is a theory of evolutionary process in which the cosmos is understood as a sign that awaits its realization as a community by the activity of interpretation. The ultimate *telos* is not the all-containing self-completeness of transparent mind, but the mutuality of shared and perfect community.

A Final Question

In conclusion, given current attitudes, it is necessary to ask whether or not Peirce's semiology can be divorced from its speculative-metaphysical context of Trinitarianism. In one sense, this is obviously so: the triune semiological process can be treated as a naturalist cosmology of communication, or merely as a useful interpretive tool. Yet these are dodges: they simply avoid carrying out the kind of metaphysical analysis that the theory of infinity, which underpins the semiology, requires. The same is true of any attempt idealistically to delimit semiology as the interpretive structure of the human sciences and to 'universalize' it on that basis, tacitly acquiescing in the no-hypothesis hypothesis. To do that, after Peirce, is merely to lapse back into hermeneutics.